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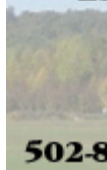
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Friday, March 3, 2006

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News

Agricultural industry is extolled at luncheon

Wednesday, March 1, 2006 8:10 AM EST

TOM DEKLE NEWS/PHOTO EDITOR

Agriculture is largest industry in Kentucky and Nelson County

Representatives of several arms of Nelson County's largest industry gathered together Saturday at Nelson County High School to express appreciation for their collective enterprise.

Agriculture was the topic and a number of aspects were addressed in a luncheon and program that lasted more than three hours and included speakers from the Governor's Office of Agricultural Policy, the University of Kentucky, the Kentucky Farm Bureau, Nelson County Conservation District, the U.S.D.A. Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Nelson County Extension Office.

Billy Ray Smith, a former Kentucky Commissioner of Agriculture, opened the program with some facts and figures about agriculture in Kentucky and Nelson County in particular.

Calling agriculture a modern miracle, Smith decried a lack of appreciation and a "void" of knowledge about agriculture today.

Agricultural production in Nelson County amounts to \$37 million annually, Smith said, pointing out the economic impact amounts to almost \$300 million, using an average multiplier of eight for each dollar of actual production.

If there were an industry that might come to Nelson County that would have an annual production more than \$37 million, the county would fall all over itself to attract that industry, Smith said.

Agriculture is the single largest industry in Kentucky and "Nelson County is in the top 25 percent in every area you care to name," Smith said.

Despite these figures, Smith said there is a constant battle to attract more people to the field. He urged the audience to educate the educators - guidance counselors, principals, and teachers - about the enormous potential in agriculture for employment in many diverse areas of specialty.

Keith Rogers, executive director of Governor Ernie Fletcher's Office of Agriculture Policy, added to that theme.

Calling Kentucky the "Indy of tobacco producing states," Rogers said there has been a huge thrust toward agriculture diversification using agricultural development funds provided through the tobacco settlement.

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He said Kentucky has invested about \$190 million directly in agriculture development since 2001, and has almost doubled that amount through matching grants.

The investment in Nelson County has been \$950,000 in model programs, Rogers said.

The amount available is decreasing though, Rogers said. "Agriculture is taking it on the chin in terms of money available," he said.

Development funds "may be zeroed out" in the next few years while an increasing amount of water and sewer development is funded through those funds, Rogers said, encouraging the agriculture community to tell representatives to "stop raiding agriculture development funds to pay for water and sewer projects."

Bill McCloskey, a management consultant in the Center for Agricultural Development and Entrepreneurship, described increasing efforts to build a cooperative relationship between tourism and agriculture through "agri-tourism."

"Agri-tourism is a fairly new concept," McCloskey said. The term is defined as "any activity that occurs on a farm for the enjoyment or education of the public to promote agricultural products, services or experiences which generate additional farm income."

McCloskey mentioned Watson's Pumpkin Patch in Nelson County as a good example of agri-tourism. He said money is available on a competitive grant basis to help develop efforts of this type.

Terry Burks, representing the UK Department of Agriculture, spoke about goat production in Kentucky and called marketing efforts in that area a shining example of the agriculture diversification program.

Kentucky now ranks in the top 5 percent in goat numbers and the No. 1 state in marketing goats successfully.

"We are on the cutting edge of goat marketing" Burks said, describing the climate and vegetation in Kentucky as a veritable "goat heaven."

While goats are the No. 1 source for consumed protein in the world, Burks said, it is the only protein source in the U.S. that does not meet the demand in production.

The opportunities are "fabulous" in this area, he said, mentioning that goats represent the biggest growth area among FFA and 4-H students who raise and show the animals.

Also speaking was Holly Bischoff of the Kentucky Farm Bureau, Gale Hundley of Nelson County Conservation District, Suzanne Harris of the USDA Natural resources Conservation Service, and several representatives of the Extension Service, including Ron Bowman, Judy Creech and Robbie Smith.

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